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ABSTRACT

A source-based approach to teaching vocabulary means starting with basic concepts that have been in human languages since their beginnings and then working with lexical and metaphorical extensions of these basic words. The purpose is not so much to teach children history, as it is to find groups of words. When words are taught in related groups, the meanings reinforce each other and children gain insights into language as a system. Fundamental principles of the source-based approach include the following: words have multiple meanings; right answers are better than wrong answers; teachers should move from the known to the unknown; thinking skills are more important than memorization skills; language is a social phenomenon; and teachers need to recognize the difference between coincidental puns and metaphorical extensions. Includes three suggested readings and a sample chart from a lesson. (PM)

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Changing Words in a Changing World: A Source-Based and Process Approach to Teaching Vocabulary.

By Alleen and Don Nilsen

Paper presented at the Annual International Reading Association Convention
(48th, Orlando, FL, May 4-8, 2003)

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Changing Words in a Changing World: A Source-Based and Process Approach to Teaching Vocabulary

Alleen and Don Nilsen Workshop on Sunday, May 5th 11:00 a.m. to 1:45 p.m. Peabody Orlando Hotel, Bayhill Suites I & II

What Is a Source-Based Approach?

A source-based approach to teaching vocabulary means starting with basic concepts that have been in human languages since their beginnings and then working with lexical and metaphorical extensions of these basic words. The purpose is not so much to teach children history as to find groups of words that can be taught as what are commonly referred to as *webs, gestalts, ladders* or *scaffolding*. When words are taught in related groups, the meanings reinforce each other and children gain insights into language as a system. A source-based approach works well with such basic topics as body parts (e.g., *headquarters, footnotes, skeleton outlines, arterial highways,* to *shoulder* a responsibility, and to *back out* of a commitment*)*, farming (e.g., a *fertile* imagination, a *cultivated* person, a *harrowing* experience, a *budding* genius), and food (*salt* of the earth, a *souped-up* car, *bringing home the bacon*, and *the cherry on top of the sundae).*

The authors of several recent vocabulary books have gone on record as supporting the teaching of related words. However, since they lack a systematic way of finding related words, they give a few examples and then leave classroom teachers to figure out their own sets of words. Few classroom teachers have the time or the training to do this except on an occasional basis. In the workshop, we will provide teachers with many word sets that can be used as the skeletons on which to build vocabulary lessons. And more importantly, we will introduce teachers to these fundamental principles of a source-based approach, which illustrate how teachers can lead children to the kind of intellectual growth that L. S. Vygotsky writes about and that current researchers in psychology and education hold up as being needed.

Words have multiple meanings. English and reading teachers frequently tell students to "use the context" to figure out a word's meaning. Most students find this to be frustrating advice because rather than telling readers what a word means, context clues serve primarily to help students screen out meanings that do not make sense in a given context. Children who know only one meaning for a word, along with those who mistakenly believe that words have only one meaning, have no resources from which to choose an appropriate meaning. To illustrate, even such simple words as *tooth* and *teeth* have both basic and extended meanings. Children in kindergarten can understand the shape-based metaphors of the *teeth* in combs, saws, rakes, and gears, but it took a class discussion for our college students to figure out what was meant when the Arizona State Legislature was criticized for passing a bill *with no teeth in it*. The bill had *no bite;* it was not enforceable.

In between these two levels of meaning, are such common allusions as *having a sweet tooth, gritting your teeth, fighting tooth and nail, escaping by the skin of one's teeth,* and *going over something with a fine-toothed comb*. In a source-based approach, this lesson on *teeth* would be followed by a lesson on *dent*, the French word for *tooth* as seen in *dentist, orthodontist, dental*

floss, and *dentures*. Children's understanding of the metaphorical process will be increased when the teacher brings in some *dent corn* (Indian corn with a dent in it) or leads children to talk about or draw a picture of a *dented* fender (one that has a bite taken out of it). A playful teacher might encourage children to draw teeth taking a bite out of a paragraph to show that it has been *indented* (bitten into), and if it is spring or summer children can bring in *dandelions* and talk about why French speakers playfully named these flowers "tooth of lion."

Right answers are better than wrong answers. A common vocabulary exercise prepared for children is to list the target word along with four possible sentences. Children are instructed to read the sentences and pick out the one sentence that uses the word correctly. Unfortunately as children read and re-read the sentences, two or three--or maybe all of them--begin to sound more and more normal. Even when children are told the "right" answer, they have already spent three-fourths of the time absorbing wrong or inappropriate meanings. And because their mental processes were the most actively involved at the time they were figuring out the answers, once the test is over, they are as likely to associate the word with the "wrong" as with the "right" answers.

An advantage of a source-based approach is that when a set of related words is taught, there is ample material from which to devise activities where students are challenged to make choices, all of which can be correct. They are encouraged to make lists and to write sentences and stories, or work on projects that include the related words.

Teachers should move from the known to the unknown. Although this is an old educational principle that virtually everyone agrees with, it is seldom followed in the teaching of vocabulary. Teachers seem to operate on the idea that once children are familiar enough with a word that they can say it when they see it in print, and can perhaps spell it, then there's nothing more to teach. Giving teachers linguistic training that introduces them to the underlying principles of a source-based approach and provides them with materials appropriate to the age levels at which they teach will show teachers that, indeed, there is much to teach in relation to basic words. In fact, the more basic the word and the longer it has been in English the more there will be to teach. For example, teachers can help children figure out which words are lexical extensions and which are metaphors. With the word *hair*, lexical extensions include *hair dryer, hair pin,* and *hair spray*, which simply name something associated with hair. In contrast, *hairy* (as in a scary experience that makes your hair stand on end), a *hairline fracture* (a very fine break), a *hair trigger* on a gun (it could go off with only the pressure of a hair), and a *hairpin curve* (it is bent sharply like the back of a hairpin) are metaphorical extensions.

Thinking skills are more important than memorization skills. Adding words to one's vocabulary through simple memorization is an inefficient way to learn language. Even people who faithfully stick with word-a-day programs learn only 365 new words in a year. And chances are that people forget most of these words because they do not have mental hooks on which to hang them: Some vocabulary books suggest mnemonic devices, but these are often so specific to the creators' minds that their effect is simply to add another memorization burden.

Once teachers are able to recognize the metaphorical underpinnings of new words, they need to develop skills in leading children to look for the features that the source of the metaphor and the target of the metaphor have in common. For example, if a teacher brings in a branch from a tree

with *leaves* on it and holds it up alongside a *loose-leaf* notebook, even fairly young children can be led to make observations about the differences and similarities of the two. First, the *leaves* on the tree are not the same color as the *loose-leaf paper*, nor are they the same shape or the same size. What they have in common is that they are both thin and the paper can fall from the notebook much like leaves can fall from the branch.

Once students discover that the features being emphasized are that of *thinness* and *the possibility of being separated*, then the teacher might lead the class to think about other thin and separate leaves as with the *leaf* of a table and the *leaflets* that advertisers distribute. A teacher could also read Oscar Wilde's children's story, "The Happy Prince," which has a plot centering on what happens when the *gold leaf* corrodes and disappears from the statue of the Prince.

When children figure out such interconnections, they are likely to generalize this newly acquired knowledge to other contexts and share their observations and discoveries with others. Such intellectual involvement means not only that they are likely to remember the specifics of their particular discovery, but also that they are developing the skill to understand metaphors. These are the kinds of skills they will need throughout life as when in the 2000 Presidential election, the public was introduced to the *butterfly ballot* and to *hanging door chads, swinging door chads*, and *tri-chads* (all of which counted as votes.) Those that did not count were the *dimples* and the *pregnants*.

Language is a social phenomenon and needs to be learned through conversation and group activities. While some children thrive on taking home lists of Latinate words to memorize, these are usually children whose parents have the time and the desire to work with their children. The parents provide the kind of back-and-forth talk, and the modeling of pronunciation, that children need if they are going to learn new words. A source-based approach provides teachers with possibilities for the kind of classroom talk that children need if their minds are going to focus on new words long enough to "absorb" the meanings. Teacher-directed talk needs to be followed by children working in small groups, which will enable more children to talk about the words and use them in various contexts as they make posters or draw pictures on white boards or on the chalkboard. They can also contribute to metaphorical group projects such as illustrating a metaphorical sandwich (*a lot of baloney, an upper crust person, to be in a pickle, to cut the mustard, to toast the bride, to be a big cheese*, etc.). and cutting out tracings of their hands to make the fronds on a *palm* tree, which got its name from the similarity of fronds to people's palms and fingers.

Teachers need to recognize the difference between coincidental puns and metaphorical extensions. Puns are created for purposes of amusement; they are surprising conundrums that cannot be figured out logically because they are based on words that coincidentally have similar sounds. Metaphors are created for purposes of communication (and sometimes amusement). They are riddles that can be solved through applying what one already knows about the world and the language to the similarity (or similarities) between the source of the metaphor and the target. Understanding the difference between puns and metaphors is not an easy concept. Teachers trained in a source-based approach will learn the difference and thereby be able to help students appreciate and benefit from understanding systematic processes of language development rather than being frustrated by what appears to be chaos.

Please see these recent articles by the Nilsen that help to explain the ideas we are working with:

"Teaching Ideas: A New Spin on Teaching Vocabulary: A Source-Based Approach," *The Reading Teacher* 56:5 (February, 2003) 436-439.

"Vocabulary Development: Teaching vs. Testing," *The English Journal* 92.3 (January, 2003) 31-37.

"Lessons in the Teaching of Vocabulary from September 11 and Harry Potter," Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy 46:3 (November, 2002) 254-260. Available: http://www.reading.org/publications/jaal/nilsen.html

A Sample Chart from a Lesson We Will Do on Animals

	Lexical Extensions	**Sentences**
Bear	Bear claw pastry Bear hug A bear for work Teddy bear	A *bear claw* probably has as many calories as two donuts. Morris is embarrassed his mother is always giving him *bear hugs*. *Teddy bears* are named after President Theodore Roosevelt, who once refused to shoot a bear that had been caught for him.. Our teacher is a *bear for work*; she gives us homework even on weekends.
Bee	Beehive Beeline Quilting bee Spelling bee	*Beehive* hairdos are not as fashionable as they used to be. As you might guess, the *Beeline Highway* in Arizona is relatively straight. People participating in either *quilting bees* or *spelling bees* are *busy as bees*. Someone who has *a bee in her bonnet* is all excited or bothered about something.
Bug	Bed bug Bug-a-boo Bug-eyed Computer bug To bug someone To bug a place	One reason motels are expensive is the constant laundering to prevent bedbugs. A *bug-a-boo* is anything people are afraid of. Real *bugs* used to crawl into computers to get warm, but today's *computer bugs* are programming problems.

Dog	Dog days Dog and pony show Dogged A dogfight To dog-ear To hotdog Underdog	The *dog days* of summer are so tiresome, it is almost a relief when school starts. If someone describes your wonderful performance as a *dog-and-pony show*, they are insulting you. *Dogged determination* goes a long ways toward success. Librarians do not appreciate it if you *dog-ear* (turn the corners down) the pages of the books you borrow. In tournaments, the *underdogs* often win because they get the support of the crowd.
Fish	Fishbowl Fish-eye Fishing Fishtailing Fishy	The family did not like living in a *fishbowl* so they moved out of the Governor's mansion. That's a pretty *fishy* excuse. My uncle's van has a *fish-eye* in the back. When my aunt is disgusted, she says, "Well, that's a fine kettle of fish."
Pig	Piggish Piggyback Piggybank Pigpen Pigskin Pigtails	The new school made them feel like *guinea pigs*. Her room is a *pigpen*. It's harder to carry someone in front of you than *piggyback*. My rich uncle gives new babies in our family a *piggybank* with a $50.00 bond tucked in the top. The boys were *piggish* about the dessert.
Rat	Rat fink Rat tail Ratty	One of the rats in *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* was insulted to learn about what people call *the rat race*. Frank Sinatra was part of the *Rat Pack*. A hundred years ago, women used to use bunches of discarded hair called *rats* to support their bouffant hair styles. Today, girls *rat* their hair by back-combing.

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